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homemakers' chat
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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Thursday, December 25, 1941.
CHRISTMAS DAY

Subject: "CHRISTMAS IN THE OTHER AMERICAN REPUBLICS." Information from the Pan-American Union and the Office of Foreign Agricultural Relations, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Merry Christmas to everybody! Here's hoping good old Santa Claus filled your stockings to overflowing and left just what you wanted under the Christmas tree; that you feasted on turkey and cranberries and sweetpotatoes and ice cream, and many other characteristic American holiday foods -- and are now ready to do a little "good-neighborly" visiting.

The U. S. Department of Agriculture is very much interested in helping the Central and South American countries produce more of the tropical agricultural products the United States needs. At the invitation of these countries, the Department has sent a number of its scientists to Latin America to help with agricultural problems. Some of these travels have also brought back interesting tales of colorful customs, especially those having to do with Christmas. Perhaps you'd like to hear about some of them.

Of course you know that Christmas falls in summer-time in many of the Latin-American countries. Christmas comes in the season of school vacations, which come chiefly between October and February, just as our schools and colleges close during the hot weather from June to September.

The pageantry of the Christmas season is much more important in most of our sister republics than the idea of giving presents. If there are gifts at all they are more likely to be connected with "Kings' Day", -- the idea is that the Magi, or Three Wise Men bring the gifts. Kings' Day is January sixth -- our "Twelfth Night", the date we take our Christmas greens or other decorations down. It is the end of the season of Christmas celebration in Latin America, too.

Except where there are a good many Americans or Europeans you do not find Christmas trees in Central or South America, or Santa Claus coming down the chimney. In fact, as there are hardly and chimneys in some of these warm countries, Santa, even when you hear of him, must leave his toys and goodies somewhere else. And, in several countries, instead of hanging up stockings, the children set out their shoes for the Magi to fill.

Let's begin with our nearest neighbor-- Mexico. The outstanding Mexican Christmas custom is the "posada", followed by a family party in which the children enjoy a "piñata." A posada is like a solemn little play, in which the members of the family act out the Christmas story in their own way. The posadas continue until "noche buena" or Christmas Eve. Then there is a lively party, and the children have great fun trying to break the piñata hung from the ceiling. We'd better explain that a "piñata" is a big clay bowl made to look like a funny doll, or an airplane, or even a big Mexican wide-brimmed hat. It is filled with candies, nuts and toys. Each child is blindfolded in turn, and given a big stick to try to break the piñata. Sometimes the papa of the family slyly pulls the piñata out of reach until everyone has had a turn. When someone succeeds in hitting the piñata hard enough to break it, all the goodies tumble to the floor and the children scramble for them.

On January sixth, the little Mexican children leave their shoes on the doorstep and in the morning find them filled with many clay playthings. The boys get flower pots, birds and other animals, the girls, painted and lacquered clay dishes and dolls. All get queer masks something like Hallowe'en faces.

As we turn southward, we find little or no present-giving in Colombia, Peru, or Argentina. But in Venezuela, "Pascua" is more like our own Christmas, with a Christmas tree, and exchange of gifts and cards. St. Nicholas leaves presents on

the children's beds. At Venezuelan Christmas parties they serve a typical dish called "hayaca" -- a meat or chicken pie covered with banana leaves.

In Ecuador, too, they have Christmas trees and hang up their stockings. Almost every Cuban family has a Christmas tree in its home, but they give their presents on "Kings' Day" -- January sixth.

Now let's turn to Brazil. Brazilian language and customs are a little different from those in other South American countries. The language is Portuguese, not Spanish, and the customs are a mixture of old and new ways. Along with historic parades of "pastorinkas" -- carol-singing boys and girls dressed as shepherds and shepherdesses -- there are Christmas trees from the southern part of Brazil, a "Papa Noel" corresponding to our Santa Claus, and a "Vovo Indio", or Grandpapa Indian. After solemn midnight celebrations on Christmas Eve, Brazilian homes have gay family suppers, which may last all night. Children are allowed to stay up for these parties as a special Christmas treat. As the season is mid-summer in Brazil, Christmas Day is a time for much open-air fun -- fireworks, picnics, boating, and other out-door sports. Like the Mexican children, Brazilian children put their shoes outside the window or door to get gifts from the "Three Kings" on January sixth.

Lack of time prevents us from telling about Christmas in every one of the 21 republics to the south of us. But in all of them you'll find a strong feast-day spirit of general good-will. Perhaps some day you'll have a chance to visit these countries for your self at the Christmas season. Maybe you'll learn to say "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year" in Spanish or Portuguese, even if you're thinking of the ice and snow and fir trees "up north." But for now -- "Merry Christmas" in American to each of you!

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